

MEMOIRS OF THE LIFE OF
Sig. AGOSTINO STEFFANI,

SOME TIME

Master of the Electoral Chapel at *Hanover*,

AND AFTERWARDS

BISHOP of SPIGA

MEMORIAL OF THE LIFE OF
SIR AGOSTINO STEFANI

MUSEUM BRITANICUM
Master of the Chapel at Hampton

B I S H
of 2 P I G
MUSEUM BRITANICUM

MEMOIRS OF THE LIFE OF THE AUTHOR.

SIGNOR AGOSTINO STEFFANI, the celebrated author of the following compositions, was born, about the Year 1650, at *Castello Franco*, a small town in the territory of *Venice*. Of his family, or descent, nothing certain is known, nor is there any further ground for conjecture, than his having, in his infancy, been a singer in the choir of some neighbouring cathedral church, or chapel; a circumstance from which we may, at least, conclude, that his parents were not distinguished for their rank in life.

HIS want of the advantages of birth and fortune was, however, amply recompensed by those extraordinary talents that nature had endowed him with, among which an excellent voice was, perhaps, not altogether the least. He had not served above two years in the choir, when a nobleman of *Germany*, who had been at *Venice* to be present at the diversions of the carnival, happened, upon some public occasion, to hear him sing, and was so pleased with

his voice, and behaviour, and those signs of genius, which by this time he began to discover, that upon application to the chapel-master, he procured his discharge from the choir, and took him to *Bavaria*, the place of his residence. At the expence of this beneficent person was *Steffani* maintained, and instructed in all the branches of useful, and ornamental, learning: the direction of his musical studies, in particular, was committed to Sig. *Hercule Bernabei*, then chapel-master to the elector of *Bavaria*, and one of the most considerable masters of his time. What proficiency he made under him will best appear from his works, and what opinion of his merit his tutor entertained, may be inferred from that strict friendship, which, for many years, subsisted between them. It may be needless, as *Steffani* was a native of *Italy*, to say that he was of the romish persuasion; however, it must not be omitted, that, in compliance with the request of his munificent patron, who was desirous of making the learned education he had bestowed on him, the means of some fur-

further advantage, our author, at the proper age, received ordination, and soon after became intitled to an appellation, by which, indeed, he is now most commonly distinguished, *viz.* that of *Abbate*, or *Abbot*.

IN the course of his studies he had composed several masses, motets, kyries, magnificats, and other essays in the church style, which he thought proper now to exhibit; and accordingly they were occasionally performed, in the chapel at *Munich*, so greatly to his reputation, that *Ernestus Augustus*, duke of *Brunswic*, the father of the late king, though a protestant prince, being a passionate lover of music, invited him to the court of *Hanover*, conferred on him the employment of master of his chapel *, and committed to his care the management of the opera, an entertainment which had then but lately found its way into *Germany*. This latter trust, however agreeable it might be to his inclination, was the occasion of great uneasiness to him; for whether it was owing to the ignorance, or petulance, of the persons employed to sing, it was, fre-

* In the courts of the protestant princes in *Germany*, the place of chapel-master is little more than a sine-cure; it is, however, the highest compliment that can be paid to a musician, and is, therefore, esteemed very honourable.

quently, with great difficulty they could be prevailed on to study their parts, so as to do justice to the composer; and, even when their condescension was greatest in this respect, so many feuds and jealousies were continually arising among them, as frequently disappointed an illustrious audience of their entertainment. This particular is, in some degree, verified, by what is related of the elector's son, the late king, who, upon some such occasion as this, prevailed on our author to resign his charge, for a short time, to him, imagining, perhaps, that his rank and quality might give him a better title to command this set of people, than even the great merit of their manager; but he was soon convinced of the difficulty of the undertaking, for in a few days he quitted it, and left them to themselves, declaring, that he could, with much more ease, command an army of fifty thousand men, than manage a company of opera singers.

HIS uneasiness on this account was also very much increased by the exactness he required in the performance of his music, which was so remarkably great, that he would never admit of any divisions, or graces, even on the most plain and simple passages, except what he wrote himself:

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nor would he, with regard to his duets in particular, ever suffer them to be performed by any of those luxuriant fingers, who had not sense enough to see the folly of sacrificing to the idle vanity of displaying their extent, or power, of voice, not merely the air, but frequently the very harmony of an author's compositions.

IT was about this time, when a taste for music prevailed so greatly at *Hanover*, that *Steffani* composed his duets, which have acquired him such an universal reputation. It is probable that he might apply his studies so much to this species of composition, in compliance with the taste of the ladies of that court; for it is observable that the poetry of them is altogether of the amatory kind, and it appears, by little memorandums, in several copies, that many of his duets were composed at the request of divers ladies of distinction, and that some of them were made for their own private practice, and amusement. Who the particular persons were, we are at a loss to discover, as they are distinguished only by initial letters, denoting their quality; except in the instance of the two duets, beginning *Inquieto mio cor*, and *Che volete*,

these appearing to have been made for, and sung by her highness the electress of *Brandenburgh* *.

FOR the poetry, to which he adapted his music, he was principally obliged to his friends, the marquess *d'Arriberti*, Count *Palmieri*, Sig. *Averara*, Abbate *Guidi*, and Abbate *Mauro Hortensio* †; but the assistance he received from these persons was not so considerable as altogether to free him from the necessity of sometimes composing to words, that, to say the least, did not call for the utmost exertions of his genius: and when every other resource failed him, he would sometimes, as an exercise of his fancy, make use of words that had formerly been set by other masters; of these, the chief are the prince of *Venosa*

* This must have been the admired lady *Sophia Dorothea*, only daughter of the aforesaid duke of *Brunswick*, and sister to the late king, and the person whom *Corelli* has honoured with the patronage of his *Opera quinta*. In the year 1684, she was married to *Frederick III.* Marquis of *Brandenburgh*, by whom she had issue the father of the present King of *Prussia*.

† This gentleman wrote also the words for twelve duets which Mr *Handel* composed for the practice of the late queen, who greatly admired this kind of composition.

sa †, and the famous *Alessandro Stradella*, so celebrated for his singing, and performance on the harp.

BUT to return: The musical talents of our author, however extraordinary, were far from being the only distinguishing part of his character; he had great natural endowments, and these he had considerably improved by study, and the conversation of learned and polite men. Nor did he confine his pursuits merely to those branches of learning that are immediately connected with his profession, but he applied himself to the study of the constitution and interests of the empire, by which he became enabled to act in a sphere, that very few of his profession were ever known to attain, politics, and the business of the public*. It is, therefore, not to be wondered at, that he was frequently employed in negotiations to foreign courts, or that he should, on such occasions, be honoured with all the marks of distinction usually paid to public ministers. Among other public transactions, he had a considerable share in

† *Carlo Gesualdo*.

* *Lully* was an instance of the like kind, he having been appointed by *Lewis XIV.* of his privy council, where he actually sat for several years.

concerting, with the courts of *Vienna* and *Ratisbon*, the scheme for erecting the dutchy of *Brunswic Lunenburg* into an electorate, a step which the critical situation of affairs, in the year 1692, rendered necessary to the preserving a proper balance between the interests of the house of *Austria*, and its adversaries, who, by the accession of the *Newburgh* family to the electorate of the *Rhine*, were now thought to be too formidable. This important service could not fail of recommending him to the friends of the *Austrian* family; accordingly the elector, as a testimony of his regard, assigned him a pension of fifteen hundred rix dollars *per annum*; and the pope, *Innocent XI.* promoted him to the bishopric of *Spiga*, a province in the *Spanish West Indies* *. Though, as the advantages resulting from this event, could but very remotely, if at all, affect the interests of the roman catholics in the empire, some have been induced to think, that this signal instance of favour, shewn by the pontiff himself, must have been the reward of a negotiation more favourable to their cause, *viz.* the procuring liberty for those

* 'Tis supposed that this dignity was only titular, for it does not appear that he ever went to reside in his diocese, or even received any revenues from thence.

those of that persuasion to erect a church at *Hanover*, and publicly to exercise their religion there; a privilege, which, till the time that *Steffani* solicited for it, had been denied them, but which, at this juncture, it was not thought prudent any longer to refuse.

HE was now considered in the light of a statesman, and was besides a dignitary of the church; and having a character to sustain, with which he imagined the public profession of his art not properly consistent, he forbore the setting his name to his future compositions, and adopted that of his secretary, or copyist, *Gregorio Piua*. Influenced, perhaps, by the same motives, in the year 1708, he resigned his employment of chapel-master, in favour of Mr *Handel*, to whose laudable concern for the memory of this great genius, as also to that of the truly learned Dr *Pepusch*, the author of these memoirs is indebted for the greater part of his information.

ABOUT the year 1724, when the academy of ancient music was instituted at *London*, *Steffani* was unanimously chosen their president; an honour which he thought it not beneath the dignity of his character to ac-

cept, and which he held to the time of his death. In return for this signal instance of respect shewn to a stranger, he wrote them a letter of thanks, and from time to time presented the academy with his compositions, which are frequently performed there. In a collection of letters that passed between the academy, and Sig. *Antonio Lotti*, organist of the ducal chapel of St *Mark* at *Venice*, we find *Steffani* mentioned in terms of great respect.* The occasion of these letters, though they did not concern our author, may be worth mentioning, and was as follows: About the beginning of the year 1731, one of the members of the academy had received from *Venice* a book of madrigals, the work of Sig. *Lotti*, and having looked it over, he appointed the eighteenth madrigal in the book, beginning *In una siepe ombrosa*, to be sung in the course of the next evening's performance, which was done accordingly: this madrigal had about four years before been presented by Sig. *Giovanni Bononcini*, who was then in *England*, and one of their members, as a composition of his own

* *Huic ut annumerarentur societati, petiisse non dedignati sunt primi ordinis viri, musicae studio dediti, praeceptosque periti; inter quos meminisse juvabit Abbatem Steffani, Spigae episcopum, qui dum nomen suum nostris tabulis inscribi rogavit, praeses unanimi omnium consensu est electus.*

own, and he hearing that it was now performed as the work of another author, writes a letter to the academy, wherein he makes grievous complaints, accuses the pretended author of plagiarism, and affirms that he himself composed it thirty years before, exactly as it is printed in the book, at the command of the emperor *Leopold*, for a proof of which he appeals to the archives of that emperor: this obliged the academy to write, by their secretary, to Sig. *Lotti*, who, in his answer, assures them that he was the author of the madrigal in question, and had formerly given a copy of it to M. *Ziani*, chapel master to the emperor *Leopold*, before whom it had been performed; and that it seemed incredible to him, that Sig. *Bononcini* should in the *gayeté de coeur*, as he expresses himself, adopt his defects for his own. This letter was delivered into *Bononcini*'s own hands, but he not thinking fit to answer it, the academy wrote again to *Venice*, and procured from *Lotti* an instrument under the seal of a public notary, wherein, after an invocation of the name of the eternal God, it is certified that four of the most eminent masters * of *Ve-*

nice had appeared before him, and having voluntarily taken their oaths, *tactō pectore et tactis scripturis*, had deposed that they knew the madrigal, *In una siepe ombrosa*, to be the work of the abovenamed Sig. *Antonio Lotti*, some of them having seen it composing in the rough draught, others having sung it, and others having heard it practised, before it went to the press: besides this certificate, there were at the same time transmitted to *London* divers attestations of persons of undoubted credit, living at *Vienna*, one of which was the Abbate *Pariati*, author of the words of the above madrigal, to the same effect. These letters, for the satisfaction of the public, (for the affair had made a great noise in the musical world) were soon after printed, and thus this remarkable contest ended.

DURING the recess of our author from business, he composed and published, in the *Italian* language, a dissertation on music, which he vindicated against the censures of a sort of small philosophers, who had asserted that its principles had no foundation in nature, and were
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maestro di capella di questa serenissima repubblica di Venezia. Gerolamo Melari, musico della ducal S. Marco. Claudio Severo Frangioni, pure musico di detta ducal di S. Marco. L' illmo, et molto Rev. Sig. D. Clemente Leopold de Tarsis & Ottavio fu cameriere della chiave d'oro di S. M. C. C. e suo general ereditario delle poste dell imperio in Venezia, & Giorgio Gentili primo violino della sud. capella di S. Marco.

* Their names were as follow, viz. molto Rev. D. Antonio Bifi,
maestro

for resolving the pleasure arising from the contemplation of harmony into fancy and caprice: this work acquired him great reputation among the learned, and was soon after translated into *Highb Dutch* by an organist of *Halberstadt* in Germany*.

IN the year 1729, an inclination to see his relations, and the place of his nativity, determined him to take a journey to *Italy*, where, after he had staid a winter, and visited the most eminent masters then living, he returned to *Hanover*: he had not been long there before some occasion called him to *Frankfort*, where he had no sooner arrived than he became sensible of the decay of his health, and being of a constitution which the slightest disorder would very sensibly affect, and, consequently, little able to endure the infirmities incident to old age, after an indisposition of a few days he died.

EXCEPT the treatise abovementioned, and a few songs collected from his opera's, it does not appear that any of his works were ever printed: that sense of the importance of his character and situation in life, which induced him to assume the name of his copyist, as has been mentioned,

* It is not certainly known who this was, but there are reasons for believing it was M. *Werkmeister*, who was a person of literature, and organist of that place.

no doubt restrained him from obliging the world in that way himself, and those who are acquainted with the reigning taste for music, will not be at a loss for a reason why no one else has thought proper to do it.

WHEN he was last in *Italy*, he was often at the palace of cardinal *Ottoboni*, with whom it was a frequent practice to have performances of opera's, oratorio's, or such other grand compositions as could from time to time be procured: on these occasions, in the absence of a principal singer, it has many times fallen to the lot of our author to be a performer; and it is said by some whose good fortune it has been to be present at such an accident, that when he sung, he was scarce loud enough to be heard, but that this defect in his voice was amply recompensed by his manner, in the chasteness and elegance of which he had few equals. As to his person, he was less than the ordinary size of men, of a tender constitution of body, which he had not a little impaired by intense study and application. His deportment is said to have been grave, but tempered with a sweetness and affability, that rendered his conversation very engaging; he was perfectly skilled in all the external forms of polite behaviour, and, which is somewhat unusual, continued



tinued to practise and observe them at the age of fourscore.

FROM these particulars, trivial as they seem, we may be enabled to form some idea of the character of this extraordinary person. Of what importance his life was to mankind, or what degree of esteem he may merit from those who imagine no life worth recording but what has been spent in the atchieving of great or glorious actions, is a matter beside the present purpose to debate. It is sufficient to say that excellence in any of those arts which the supreme

being, by the constitution of our nature, has appointed as the sources of true and rational delight, must ever be deemed a laudable pursuit, and, consequently, that our regard for such men as have attained to a proportionable degree of perfection in that divine art, of which our author was so eminent a professor, is founded on very nearly the same principles as justify that tribute of esteem and reverence, which the universal sense of mankind concurs in paying to the memory of a *Homer*, a *Milton*, or a *Raphael*.

